

VII. ORIENTATION AND MOBILITY

Orientation and Mobility are the terms that refer to the techniques used by visually impaired persons so that they may “travel” safely and efficiently. In this context, “travel” means moving around inside one’s home or outside within the community. It includes walking with or without a mobility aid, such as a white cane or guide dog, and using all modes of transportation, such as buses, trains, taxis and airplanes.

Orientation refers to the relationship between a person and the physical space that surrounds him/her. It includes conceptualizing spatial relationships, such as right angles for negotiating intersections and understanding the layout in one’s own home or office so that a person can confidently and efficiently function in these environments.

Mobility refers to techniques used to move safely through the environment while getting from Point A to Point B.

For visually impaired persons, mobility can be a particular challenge when attempting to move about safely in an environment full of obstacles and pitfalls. Yet mobility is essential to personal and professional progress, productivity, independence and self-esteem.

Any person, regardless of the degree of vision loss, can be taught to move around safely in his/her home, on the job, and in the community. State certified Orientation and Mobility Specialists teach the techniques necessary to achieve independent mobility, both to low vision and to

totally blind clients. Such techniques include the safe and efficient use of residual vision as well as the use of mobility aids. The most common mobility aid is the white cane, followed by the guide dog. However, rapidly developing technology is bringing new mobility aids to the market constantly.

THE WHITE CANE

The white cane is used by many visually impaired Californians to achieve independent mobility in their homes and communities, but how well do most people understand its functions? What images come to mind for most people when they think of a white cane?

For many, the white cane has negative connotations. It brings to mind images of helpless and pitiable persons groping along the street. Even many blind and visually impaired persons subscribe to these images and refuse to carry the white cane so others will not know they are blind.

It is unfortunate that the white cane conjures up such misconceptions because, in actual fact, it is the tool which contributes much to the independence and mobility of blind persons. It has liberated millions of blind people worldwide from restricted lives of dependence and passivity. For these blind individuals, the white cane is more of a symbol of accomplishment and freedom.

The white cane does much more than move along the sidewalk alerting the blind pedestrian to obstacles in the path. First, it grants a blind pedestrian protections and the right-of-way while carrying the cane. The white cane also provides a great deal of invaluable information about the surroundings. For example, the tapping sound echoes off the fronts of buildings as the cane user walks down the street. The sound changes as he or she passes openings such as doorways, driveways and alleys. In large places, such as train station lobbies or airports, the echo lets the user know the size of the space and the locations of hallways and stairwells.

The tip of the cane is very sensitive, providing crucial information about ground surfaces. For example, the cane indicates when the concrete of the sidewalk changes into the asphalt of the street. This information is especially important in places where there are no curbs. Other surface changes can denote entrances to buildings, bus stops, and the front of the blind person's home or other destinations. In interior spaces, floor coverings are very informational. For example, in many hotel lobbies, department stores, and governmental buildings, tile or marble indicates walk ways, and carpeting indicates seating or merchandise areas or vice versa.

The cane picks up all these changes and many more, not to mention drop-offs like stairs or the edge of a platform in a train or subway station. When properly used, the white cane can give a blind person much needed information to move about safely through most environments.

In summary, the white cane enables blind people to travel safely and independently all over the world and to engage in the full gamut of vocational and leisure activities.

THE GUIDE DOG

The decision whether to use a cane or a dog can be a major one, which should not be made lightly. The relationship that can develop between humans and dogs can be of the most loving and powerful nature. The assistance that guide dogs provide can be tremendously useful, making a significant contribution to independent mobility. However, there are many factors to consider before making this choice.

Factors to Consider Before Choosing a Guide Dog

- Dog training schools require visually impaired applicants to be good travelers. Thus, they must have already had training in Orientation and Mobility and have good travel skills. A guide dog does not actually take people to their destination. The human partner must know how to get where he or she wants to go and give appropriate commands to the dog.
- Dogs like to walk rapidly. Their human companions must be in good physical condition and be able to maintain a brisk pace.

- Dogs are deeply caring and devoted. Their emotional well being depends on the love and attention of their human companions. The relationship that develops between a guide dog and a visually impaired person is usually very strong. This sometimes creates jealousy on the part of other family members. Likewise, guide dogs expect to accompany their partners everywhere and become unhappy if left behind when their partners go out with other family members or friends.
- Dogs are a big responsibility. They need to be relieved every several hours no matter how inconvenient this may be for their human partners. The human partner is expected to pick up after the dog and to repair or pay for any damage the dog may cause. Dogs must be groomed and bathed regularly.
- Dogs are an added expense. Their food and grooming bills can be considerable, and while some training schools provide free veterinarian care, not all do. Also, it may not be geographically feasible to use their services.
- Dogs can be social icebreakers. Most people love dogs and want to comment on how attractive and wonderful they are. However, it can be disconcerting to discover that the sighted public thinks that the humans are totally dependent on their dogs and that the dogs are taking care of them. Tact and diplomacy are often required in interacting with the public.

Think about these issues and how you might deal with them. A very good way to learn more about the experience of having and using a guide dog is to talk with people who do use them.

You can get information on dog training schools by contacting the Assistance Dog Special Allowance Program listed in the “Financial Assistance Programs” section of this ***Handbook***.

NEW MOBILITY AIDS

Some of the more promising new mobility aids are: Talking Signs™ that transmit information to hand-held receivers which announce the location of important features such as public telephones, restrooms, street addresses, traffic signals, etc.; portable geographical positioning systems (GPS) which let users know precisely where they are; computerized city maps which provide users with information on how to get to their destinations; and canes that beep and/or vibrate to indicate objects not only at ground level, but at waist and hand level.

These and many other new “high tech” mobility aids are constantly being developed and improved and this will revolutionize travel for visually impaired persons. The two basic mobility aids that are still the most reliable and universally used are the white cane and the guide dog.